

# National Adoption Day Marked in Paw Paw

By Paul Garrod

**PAW PAW** - A Hartford area family had a special reason to celebrate Thanksgiving this year, following the adoption of four children during a Tuesday morning adoption hearing in the Van Buren County Probate Court.

The adoption hearing, held before Probate Judge Frank Willis, marked Michigan Adoption Day, now in its third year.

It was 6-1/2 years ago that Patricia, now 11, Stephanie, 10, Jeffrey, 8, and Angel, 7, came into the lives and home of Kenny and Gayla Bess. Living with the couple on weekends, the four had earlier spent time in two other foster homes.

For the past 2-1/2 years, the four children have been a permanent fixture in the Bess household.

And this day sealed that fixture.

Not only has the relationship grown between the children and the adopting parents, who also have two other adopted children, and one in guardianship, but also the children's birth mother and the adopting parents.

"It's a good relationship with the birth mother and the adoptive family. Very rarely does that happen," said Judge Willis.

"It gives the kids the stability."

The court terminated the rights of the children's birth father, and the mother soon after, gave up her rights.

During the hearing, Julie Beckett, a Van Buren County Department of Human Services employee, told Judge Willis, "The love there (in the Bess household) is evident."

Jeffrey was eager to get the formal process over, telling Judge Willis, "I want to be a Bess and I want to have a dad," which brought a round of laughter from the small group gathered in the courtroom.

Judge Willis then asked Jeffrey, "How about a mom? Is that okay, too?"

Gayla, tried to hold back emotions, saying, "This adop-



**MICHIGAN ADOPTION DAY** - To mark Michigan Adoption Day, Kenny and Gayla Bess, of Hartford, took part in a ceremony Tuesday to adopt four siblings. The couple is shown with their expanded family that also includes Melanie, 15; and Jennifer, 15, of whom were also adopted; and Aaron, 10, who the couple have guardianship. Van Buren County Probate Judge Frank Willis is shown at far left. Courier-Leader photo



**IT'S OFFICIAL** - Angel Bess, 7, of Hartford, pounds down the gavel of Van Buren County Probate Judge Frank Willis and says, "I'm adopted" Tuesday morning to mark her official adoption by Kenny and Gayla Bess. Angel and three other siblings, Patricia, 11; Stephanie, 10; and Jeffrey, 8, were also adopted by the Hartford couple. Courier-Leader photo

tion is a real happy thing for us. And it's something we all knew was going to happen for a long time."

She added, "I think they know that their mother will be a part of their lives. It's a really good thing for these kids. It says a lot that they can love their mother and love us, and be able to separate it."

Bess, a case manager for Van Buren County Mental Health, continued, "They're just really neat children and we love them a whole lot."

Kenny Bess, employed by

Krenek's RV Sales, of Coloma, said, "It's been a long time coming, watching them grow to this point. It's going to be fun to watch them grow more, and see how they turn out."

Judge Willis held four files, each one filled with papers about one of the children. He then asked each one to come up separately and take part in the ceremony.

As each one made his or her way to his bench to look at the order of adoption papers, Judge Willis asked each to help seal the adoption orders by hitting

the gavel on his stand, saying, "I'm adopted."

Jeffrey then banged the gavel down, and Judge Willis said, "You're a Bess. Congratulations," as the two exchanged "high fives."

Angel, the youngest, made her way up to Judge Willis, who said, "We haven't forgotten about you, as he lifted her up to sit on the judge's stand."

Judge Willis concluded, "It took six years for the Bess children to be yours. God must have had a plan because you opened your homes to them and kept your hearts in the right places."

As the adoption hearing concluded, Judge Willis presented the family with a framed resolution of Michigan Adoption Day from the Michigan Supreme Court.

Soon after, the new family headed out the doors of the courthouse to their vehicle, where they will travel to Pensacola, Fla., and spend Thanksgiving with Gayla's relatives.

Michigan Adoption Day is sponsored by the Michigan Department of Human Services (DHS) and the Michigan Supreme Court.

Over 30 counties across the state were expected to participate, with some holding informational open houses with speakers and information about the adoption process.

While DHS and state courts strive to reunite children with their birth parents, doing so is not always in the child's best interest.

Courts may terminate parental rights in cases of child abuse and neglect.

There are more than 4,000 children with parental rights terminated who are either waiting for their adoption to be finalized or waiting for a family.

Most children who are waiting for a family are older, members of minorities, or sibling groups - the hardest to place.

Anyone interested in adopting a child may contact 1(800) 589-6273 or on the Internet at [www.mare.org](http://www.mare.org)